



A TOURISM INNOVATION CASE

An Actor-Network Approach

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Abstract: This article examines the innovations of a tourism company in the particular context of French ski resorts. Actor-Network Theory, applied to the tourism sector, constitutes the conceptual framework of the study. The results, following a multi-methods qualitative approach, show that the company's growth is related to the implementation of new associations between actors and non-human entities. Thanks to its "leader translator," the company manages to interest and enrol actors in its project. The analysis helps ultimately understand how, within a tourist destination, existing resources can be reconfigured to create unique and innovative products that will ensure a company's success. **Keywords:** winter sports resorts, destination management, SME, case study research, qualitative research. © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, tourism innovation has increasingly become a topic of research within the tourism field (OECD, 2006; Peters & Pikkemaat, 2006). But studies in this area are still scattered and fragmented: Some analyse economic dimensions (e.g., Weiermair, 2006), others are focused on the determinants of dynamic change (e.g., Chan, Go, & Pine, 1998; Hjalager, 2000; Richards & Carson, 2006), or on the role of entrepreneurship (e.g., Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2004; Koh & Hatten, 2002). Amongst this literature, numerous articles have been written about innovation in Alpine resorts and the skiing industry (e.g., Flagestad & Hope, 2001; Pechlaner & Fuchs, 2002; Pechlaner & Tschurtschenthaler, 2003; Pikkemaat & Weiermair, 2003). Few of these papers, however, have focused on tourism in the French context, despite its relative importance in international tourism.

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France's position in international tourism is significant: According to the *World Tourism Organisation* (2007), it ranks first in terms of international tourist arrivals and third in terms of tourism revenues. Furthermore, it is a leader regarding winter sports with its 357 resorts out of the 4000 recorded worldwide (*Ministère délégué au Tourisme*, 2005). In France, the winter sports resorts market accounts for a large share of the tourism economy (*Ministère délégué au Tourisme*, 2008). However, winter sports are at a turning point here. The economic results are still favourable in major resorts but a number of cyclical and structural problems call into question their prosperity (*Agrawala*, 2007; *SEATM*, 1993). These problems have led to a slower growth for the vast majority of the resorts, and this trend affects all market segments and all activity sectors of these tourist sites.

Amongst French winter sports, skiing reigns supreme. The activity has been for a long time the "cash cow" that anchored the success of these tourist areas. French ski resorts have thus never really felt the need to diversify and therefore, resort activities essentially revolve around skiing. All product development and packaging are conceived around this activity. However, the necessary diversification of ski resorts is a problem that has repeatedly been raised in France since the beginning of the 1990s by various actors (*FACIM*, 2004; *SEATM*, 1993; *SEATM-BIPE*, 1991). Expansion into new areas is presented as an imperative to address problems that are both cyclical (lack of snow, school holiday schedules) and structural (inadequate product offerings in response to evolving customer expectations). Although one could note some elements of product diversification in the resorts, these result from haphazard evolution rather than from a concerted planning approach. Moreover, these new products all appear to complement and add to the skiing activity. It is therefore difficult to really talk about innovation in French winter sports resorts: These are essentially tourist areas with a singular focus on skiing.

In addition, French winter sports resorts represent a complex system involving a wide variety of actors. Most major stations are integrated resorts (e.g., *Les Arcs 1950*) created by a single operator who operates all resort activities. But French law (the so-called *Mountain Law* of 1985) now gives the municipality on which the resort stands the responsibility to manage and develop tourism in each resort. It then has the opportunity to take up management duties on its own (direct management) or to delegate it to a private sector operator. In the latter case, the delegation may involve only the operation of lifts (partial delegation) or both the operation of lifts and management of ski slopes (total delegation). Most major ski resorts in France operate under the latter model (*Marcelpoil & Boudières*, 2006). In addition, in a winter sports resort, a whole network of economic (independent tourism enterprises) and social (non governmental) actors revolve around these central actors (organizing authority and private operator). A French winter sports resort is thus characterized by a conglomerate of actors composed of tourist operators, local elected officials, and civil society.

Winter sports resorts in France are therefore a complex system of action with specific operating logics, composed of a multitude of actors

and strong corporatism. But among these actors, some companies manage to experience strong growth. Their success begs questions because these companies are paradoxically operating in an unfavourable context. Indeed, the tourism destinations in which they operate are no longer growing. Most of them are still profitable, but they represent a mature market with few prospects for development; their ability to innovate is questionable (we explained earlier that French winter sports resorts are essentially designed for the ski product). The purpose of this article is thus to understand how companies can succeed in this complex and unfavourable environment.

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To understand the success of these winter sports and tourism enterprises and the processes at work, the research draws on actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005; Law, 1992). This sociological approach is particularly relevant in studying tourism phenomena and growth mechanisms because it focuses on the “collective” (Latour, 2005, p. 14) being formed. Indeed, it refuses to focus on an “already made society” (Latour, 2005, p. 172) to the detriment of new associations and a network being produced. According to this theory, collective action cannot be explained by “matters of fact,” or by the assumption that “society is unequal and hierarchical” (Latour, 2005, p. 64) and would only be made up of interactions between social actors. For theorists of actor-network, one cannot assume a hypothetical-deductive method that presumes a priori the existence of social aggregates; these are to be demonstrated. Similarly, it cannot be presumed that the nature/culture dichotomy pre-structures the “collective” (Latour, 1993).

Thus to understand collective action, the researcher should not “impose a priori some spurious *asymmetry* among human intentional action and a material world of causal relations” (Latour, 2005, p. 76). This principle of symmetry implies therefore that the researcher should go beyond the usual opposition between nature and society, between local and global; it introduces the non-human entities in the course of an action. The social ties are heterogeneous by nature: Multiple objects and non-human elements enter into their composition alongside the actors. Like humans, these non-humans can be mediators. They do not determine collective action and do not act like actors, but they take part in the action and ensure its continuity. Indeed, they are the ones who make associations possible because they link up the actors and give meaning to the connections by transforming resources.

Given actor-network theory (ANT), collective action is thus a concatenation of actors and non-human entities, and a translation implemented through a translator will create heterogeneous associations between these different actors, which then become networked. The translation is a series of successive movements, transformations, redefinitions of the collective project (which may be part of a “superior common good,” as Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) suggest), in which

actors are mobilized through various ways. The network is indeed a chain of actions consolidated by mediators (Callon & Law, 1997; Latour, 2005), during which humans and non-humans are “interested” and “enrolled.” It can therefore be regarded as “a seamless, interconnected fabric composed of heterogeneous elements” (Law, 1989, p. 146, translation by the authors), where actors and non-humans are associated with the same project. Everyone feels concerned because one knows one can play a role, and is therefore involved.

The Transposition of ANT to Tourism: The Resort as a Network

Some (but few) researchers have used ANT to study tourism (Franklin, 2003; Franklin, 2004; Johannesson, 2005; Rodgera, Moorea, & Newsome, 2009; Van Der Duim, 2005). In their studies, they showed how this theory can be a useful tool to examine processes at work in tourism. Van Der Duim (2007), particularly, introduced the concept of “tourismscapes.” For this author, tourism is a hybrid collective in perpetual movement and this network includes at the same time three components: actors, non-human entities, and interactions. First, the involved actors; they are on the one hand the tourists—consumers of tourism services, and on the other hand, the providers who produce these services. The second component, the non-human entities, can be of very diverse nature. They can be objects (cars, restaurants, lodgings, lifts, etc.), natural resources (mountains, snow, etc.), information or means of communication (brochures, web sites, newspapers, rail tickets, etc.), technologies, services (e.g., sports activities), etc. Third, there would be no tourism, or in other words, no “tourismscapes” without interactions; that is what connects these people and these non-humans. Thus, from actor-network theory, Van Der Duim re-conceptualizes tourism with the idea of tourismscapes as “actor-networks connecting, within and across different societies and regions, transport-systems, accommodation and facilities, resources, environments, technologies, and people and organizations” (2007, p. 967).

A ski resort is a tourist destination. It is indeed an area of consumption configured for a targeted service type: the ski tourist product (Flagestad & Hope, 2001). Van Der Duim’s analysis of tourism is therefore well suited to a winter sports resort, and helps highlight the hybrid network that constitutes the resort. For the purpose of this study, we can follow a tourist coming to sojourn in a winter sports resort, to find traces of these tourismscapes. All associations of humans and non-humans revolve around skiing: hosts, restaurateurs, equipment renters, service providers (ski instructors, for example), lifts, and ski slopes, etc. It is indeed skiing as a non-human entity that links up all different actors; but the tourist is also involved in this resort network because without him/her, there would be no tourism consumption and therefore no winter sports resort. The tourist who comes into the resort must be able to find accommodations, food services, equipment rentals, skiing lessons, ski passes, and would also like to do other activities such as shopping or going to the movie theatre. In addition, the lifts

that get the tourist up the slope and the groomed slopes that allow the tourist to get down the mountain are what enable him/her to practice skiing. But this implies that these devices are present, maintained, and managed, hence the existence of a ski run and lift operator. Considering what was described above, we can identify French winter sports resorts as “tourismscapes” (Van Der Duim, 2007) within the meaning of hybrid collective (i.e., a combination of heterogeneous actors, both human and non-human (Callon, 2004)) with a common project (the ski product) that is a positive sum game: Each of the involved actors (local elected officials, tourist operators, tourists, etc.) finds its interest (through the skiing element).

Corporate Success in Winter Sports Resorts

To provide a detailed understanding of the mechanisms of success of companies providing sports and tourism-related services in winter sports resorts—typically static collectives—we must submit firms to a “socio-technical” analysis (Akrich, Callon, & Latour, 2002). This means following their production and their implementation within the tourism destination and examining how they manage to get an “aggregation of interests” (Akrich et al., 2002) around their project. The arrival of companies in these tourist areas indeed implies new processes of ordering, new associations between sports and tourism entrepreneurs, governmental actors, civil society, tourists, technologies and environments (Van Der Duim, 2005) and thus new translations to mobilize and get the support of all these heterogeneous actors. The analysis should help discern whether the existing hybrid network—winter sports resort—moves, that is, if it evolves from the state of “tourismscapes” with skiing as the “superior common good,” to another state, being translated by a change of the (usual) links between involved actors and non-human entities. Thus, in order to understand how the development process of the products takes place and how the different actors are interconnected and associated with the production of those, the following reflection seeks to restore the diversity of decisions taken in uncertain contexts, the heterogeneity of involved entities, and the displacements occurring from the “events” over time. Studying the traces left by humans and non-humans would provide answers to our research question, namely to understand in depth how a company provider of sports and tourism-related services can evolve and succeed in a winter sports resort, a mature environment that is no longer growing.

Study Methods: A Qualitative Perspective

This research follows an inductive (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) and comprehensive (Weber, 1978) approach that is based on the experiences of actors and the sense that they give to their actions to reconstruct the reality of the system they operate in. Riley and Love (2000), Walle

(1997) and Decrop (1999) have all lamented the relative lack of qualitative methods in tourism research. However, qualitative approaches appear to have gained increasing recognition, being prominently featured in recent literature (e.g., Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007; Gibson, 2006; Hollinshead, 2006; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Westwood, Morgan, & Pritchard, 2006). The present study is part of this “new turn” (Tribe, 2005). It reflects a desire to address tourism management research questions through qualitative methods that provide opportunities to better explain complex processes. Thus, to understand the organizational process related to the growth of tourism companies in a particular environment, that of a winter sports resort, it is based on single case study of a small business, called Delta, which is an inbound travel agency in the French Alps (the name of the company has been changed to respect its anonymity). Miles and Huberman (1994) explained that a monograph is to study a “context of social interactions” in depth. A single case study methodology (Yin, 2003) was chosen because of the unique opportunity to access data and to implement a working case study and qualitative methodology in the context of a business. The multi-methods approach (Brewer & Hunter, 1989) is indeed consistent but difficult to reproduce with several companies (particularly as regards participant observation). Before describing the specific methods, let us present the Delta company, the single case of this study, as well as the products it produces and delivers in the winter sports resorts. Delta is an SME (Small and Medium Enterprise), provider of sports and tourism-related services, established in a winter sports resort. This company is experiencing explosive growth both in terms of sales and in terms of human and material resources.

Presentation of the Case: Delta, A Company with Strong Growth

The Delta company has a particular positioning: It operates within the sector of business tourism, which includes meetings, incentive, conventions, and exhibitions (both trade and consumer shows) (Davidson, 1994; Davidson & Cope, 2003; Getz, 2008; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001). It is not, therefore, involved in leisure tourism as most winter resort providers are. Also, within this sector, Delta addresses several commercial aspects. On the one hand, Delta is an incoming tourism business in the French Alps; it organizes and coordinates seminars and business events in winter sports resorts. This means that it assembles various services (accommodation, catering, transportation, activities, etc.) that are sold to the customers for an all-inclusive price. For this, the company has a travel agent’s license. Indeed, French law (law of July 13, 1992) regulates the sale of tourist packages, which are defined as a service resulting from the combination of at least transportation and accommodation. Other tourist services such as food services, visits, or guiding can be included in the package and sold for an all-inclusive price. On the other hand, Delta produces sports or other activities for business tourists. The firm produces its own services, using its own resources, and so there is rarely a need for temporary labour. It

should be noted that when Delta produces sports activities, its services are subject to specific regulations. Indeed, in France, sports supervision for payment is regulated by various laws (Law of August 6, 1963; Decree of June 15, 1972; local bylaws in 1974, then Law of July 16, 1984 relating to the organization and promotion of physical and sports activities). They impose that each of the proposed activities be supervised by a person holding a national diploma (“Brevet d’Etat d’Educateur Sportif”) specific to each sport activity. These diplomas are essentially activity-specific and the few cases of versatility are all strictly defined in legal terms.

Therefore, Delta offers, for business tourism clients, custom-made products ranging from simple activities and combinations of activities, to all-inclusive products such as seminars. But to meet the specific requirements of its clientele, the company does not focus on skiing. It offers incentive products, which have a goal of stimulation, reward, or motivation (Kurtzman, 2001; Ricci & Holland, 1992; Shinew & Backman, 1995). The following presents some of Delta’s products, in order to properly understand what the company produces and delivers. Delta offers a product called “Olympics.” This product is composed of several activities (different from skiing), organized on a reserved and privatized site of the ski area, with an animator and sound entertainment. To understand the originality of this product, we can mention some of the many activities which are atypical in the sense that they are very different from the usual winter sports resort activities. There are, for example, sports activities such as sled dog, skijoring, ice diving, quad driving, etc., that are traditional but rare in resorts. There can be folklore activities (horse shoe pitching, initiation to alphorn music, assembly of Swiss alarm clocks, lumberjack competitions, regional product tasting, giant pick-up-stick, etc.). Finally, the activities can be quite simply original such as “airboarding,” “snowscooting,” or “snake-gliss” (sledges dovetailing one after the other to form a chain like a snake), snow sculpture, etc. These activities are most often offered in a competitive format.

Then, the company sells “evenings with an altitude.” This activity is organized in a restaurant located on the skiing domain (usually closed in the evening). Various activities are offered to accompany the meal: animation with traditional wooden games, cocktail with regional product tasting, and musical animation. Moreover, this evening is coupled with a sliding activity (other than skiing) which, according to the situation (depending on the location of the restaurant), is used either to reach the establishment or to leave it. In the latter case, customers reach the restaurant after trail closure, either in tracked vehicles, by ski lift, or by foot, and they return (after the dinner) with a “snake-gliss” downhill ride. Finally, the flagship product of the company is the “tepee product.” It is a dinner or a lunch organized on the ski area, in special tents (tepees), with the comfort of a normal food service provider (floor, tables, benches, decoration). A decor is specially set up to create an atmosphere in harmony with the spirit of the Native American evening. Animations can be held during the reception of customers or during the meal. Clients come to (and leave) the tepees

camp, which is installed in a “virgin” site of the ski area (away from the groomed slopes), through various means of transportation. In addition, this product can be grouped together with the “Olympics” held nearby.

A Multi-Methods Research Approach

From a qualitative perspective, the first author of this paper implemented three different methods of investigation, whose triangulation of gathered data made it possible to ensure the validity of the research (Decrop, 1999; Decrop, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Thietart, 2001; Yin, 2003): participant observation, in-depth interviews, and collection of existing documents. First, participant observation must be understood as the physical presence of the researcher in the company. Bowen (2002) suggested that too few tourism studies used participant observation to study consumer behaviour. His argument, expressed in the context of consumer studies, is also valid in the context of management studies. Between 2003 and 2007, the first author worked for Delta as a project manager or seminar leader, over periods ranging from a few days to four consecutive months. In addition, the researcher was involved in a strategic project that aimed at establishing a subsidiary of the company in a skiing resort. This participant observation was used as a means of creating a trust relationship with various stakeholders and thereby facilitated access to data. She was also allowed to participate in several strategic company meetings. Finally, during these periods of “immersion,” the full cooperation and availability of Delta’s leader to the researcher should be noted. He “played the game” of transparency by assuring unlimited access to all resources needed to carry out the research.

Second, in-depth interviewing was the main method of collecting information for this research. Thirty-four interviews were conducted. The subjects were the leader of Delta and the actors belonging to the relevant environment (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980) of the company such as hosts, carriers, restaurateurs, activity providers or ski run and lift operators. Only the key actors (i.e., those with whom the company is regularly in relation for developing and delivering products in the skiing resorts where Delta operates or where it attempts to operate) were selected (see Table 1). They were all interviewed between February and November 2006 and the interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were carried out in a semi-directive way, using an interview guide built around the dimensions stemming from the conceptual approach and the research question. All interviews were digitally recorded with permission from the actors and on condition of confidentiality. Interviews were then transcribed in full.

Third, in parallel to participant observation and in-depth interviews, the researcher was also involved in finding all documents that could help in the understanding of the situation as it related to the research question. These documents (agreements and local bylaws provided by mayors or ski run and lift operators for example) helped clarify and

Table 1. Information About Interviewees

Number of interviews	Actors	Job titles
Resorts of Morzine-Avoriaz and Montriond (Haute-Savoie area)		
1	Host (hotel chain)	Sales manager of the Rhône-Alpes region and of business tourism of the hotel chain
1	Host (hotel)	Hotel manager
1	Ski run and lift operator	General manager
1	Carrier (by tracks engine)	Director
1	Carrier (by autobus)	Sales manager
1	Restaurateur	Person in charge of purchases and of management control
1	City hall (Morzine-Avoriaz)	Deputy Mayor
1	City hall (Montriond)	Deputy Mayor
1	Sport provider	Self-employed person—Hiking guide
1	Tourism office	Communication Manager
Resort of Arc 1950-Bourg Saint Maurice (Savoie area)		
1	Host (hotel chain)	Sales manager of the hotel chain
1	Ski run and lift operator	General manager
1	Carrier (by autobus)	Administrative and sales manager
1	Restaurateur	Personal assistant
1	Restaurateur (caterer)	Director
1	City hall	Deputy Mayor
1	Sport provider	Director
1	Activity provider	Director
1	Concurrent	Director
Resort of Alpe d'Huez (Isère area)		
1	Host (hotel)	Sales manager
1	Ski run and lift operator	Sales manager
1	Restaurateur	Director
1	City hall	Deputy Mayor
1	Sport and activity provider	Person in charge of technical matters
1	Tourism office	Director
1	Concurrent	Director
Actors linked to Delta's management		
4	Delta's leader	
2	Accountant	Public accountant
1	Insurance agent	Director
Other actor		
1	Customer—Partner (events agency)	Director

verify (in some cases) what the actors said. They also provided additional evidence to support the analysis and validate the research.

A Content Analysis

Data were then submitted to a content analysis and more specifically to a thematic analysis of all (fully transcribed) interviews and collected documents (Bardin, 2007). The use of a qualitative approach allows the understanding of complex organizational processes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). From the perspective of “modest sociology” (Law, 1994), the researcher tells in-depth stories which show how actors and non-human entities connect, and which explain the recursive processes. For that purpose, during the analysis, the researcher is interested in the emerging processes, in the changes, in the movements made. However it is necessary to understand (and accept) that these stories remain “modest” in the sense that on the one hand, they are still incomplete (unfinished) and are therefore limited, and that on the other hand, the researcher does not claim to be different from those whom he or she studies. The interactions are never neutral; the researcher is also involved in the action. The interest of such an approach resides finally in a “work of explanation” (Callon, 1999) which gives something which results in significant insights (Mougenot, 2002).

Study Findings: A “Socio-Technical” Innovation in Winter Sport Resorts

Let us first look at the usual winter sports resort customer. When a tourist arrives to a winter resort, he or she looks for hospitality services (accommodation and food), rents ski equipment, buys a ski pass, takes a ski lift, and goes skiing. He or she may also take lessons from a ski instructor. The winter sports resort customer comes therefore in this area essentially to ski, and during all activity periods, he or she goes up (with ski lifts) and down the slopes. In the evening, the tourist can do other activities such as shopping or recreation (bar or nightclub, for example). This connection of humans (hosts, ski track and lift operators, activity providers, tourists, etc.) and non-humans (lodging, ski lifts, skis, etc.) corresponds to the usual hybrid collective of a French Alpine resort, in other words, to Van Der Duim’s “tourism-scapes” (2007). However, when a Delta customer comes to a winter sports resort, different associations are deployed. Delta wants to offer its customers different things in different places, but with the existing actors and resources. The associations described in the following section have been traced through the analysis of the products presented earlier.

The Associations Deployed: Nature of the Innovation

The Use of the Ski Area. For the implementation of its untypical products, Delta needs firstly to access the ski area, and then to operate it.

Indeed, the company first uses the ski area because customers must be taken to where the service will be delivered (mountain restaurant, tepee camp, and various sites for activities). Entering and circulating within the ski area, normally done using ski lifts or on skis, may be implemented in various ways. Access to a mountain restaurant, for example, can occur through a specially opened ski lift (after the closing of the ski area): “They launched a product with special opening hours for ski lifts; this had never been done before in the resort” (host one). This non-human entity, normally expected to take skiers up the slopes, is used by Delta to transport pedestrian customers. Sometimes, at Delta’s request, these ski lifts are even required to operate the descent, that is, in the opposite way of their “normal” working order. Moreover, to reach the tepees and activity sites, customers must move by foot. The pedestrian paths they use are specifically groomed by the track operator. Customers are also required to use some of the slopes as pedestrians. This behaviour is transgressive because by law, the use of these slopes is reserved for skiers (Mountain Law of 1985). Delta therefore needs a special authorization from the ski run operator. Secondly, Delta delivers its products using the ski area for purposes other than skiing. It uses spaces away from the tracks to establish tepees and organize lunches or dinners, and to set up the various “Olympics” activities. It also uses ski slopes to carry out snake-gliss downhill runs by night. However, as previously stated, the use of those slopes is reserved for skiers; using slopes is also limited to the opening hours of the ski area. In conclusion, Delta mobilizes the non-humans available in winter sports resorts (ski area included ski slopes, ski lifts, etc.), but the company does so in an unusual way. It allocates new functions to them, assigns them new roles, in order to offer its atypical products: Delta therefore transforms the function of these non-human entities.

The Delivery of Equipment. Snowmobiling in France is a regulated activity. Recreational use is prohibited in natural areas. The snowmobile can therefore only be used by the ski run operator for securing the ski area and carrying out repairs. However, Delta negotiates permission with the track operator to use this vehicle for other purposes such as moving sound equipment or transporting the caterer or other providers and their equipment. The snowmobile is even used during downhill snake-gliss runs to get trains of luges and sleds back to the top of the slopes; ski instructors also use it to ensure a smooth flow of service.

The Professions Gap. To install its tepees on the ski area and carry out its activities, Delta also calls upon the track operator. On the company’s request, this actor specially grooms certain areas of the domain which are not ski slopes, although the track operator’s mission is usually limited to working the areas that are used for skiing. Also, Delta pays the track operator to groom and repair the slopes following damage done when they are used at night during company activities. This helps to retain this actor’s goodwill, as he is very attached to the quality of the slopes he manages. In addition, to organise lunches or dinners

in tepees and to implement specific activities, Delta needs the cooperation of providers such as a caterer, a disc jockey, an alphorn player, etc. These actors must provide their services in unusual places, with all the constraints that this implies: pedestrian or snowmobile access to the site—the latter when there is cumbersome material to transport. It should be noted that this type of material transport involves an extra constraint: It can only be done in the morning before the tracks open for business or in the evening after they close, even when the service is scheduled to take place several hours later. The company thus diverts not only the non-human resources related to skiing (the ski area including ski slopes, lifts, etc.) but also the track operator and other providers. For the track and lift operators, for example, this diversion occurs over several dimensions: spatial (Delta involves the actor away from his usual geographical field of intervention), commercial (Delta involves the actor beyond his normal professional responsibilities), and temporal (Delta involves the actor beyond his normal working hours):

We transport people; we sell lift tickets. And Delta isn't a big buyer of lift tickets! [...] They use the lifts for pedestrians. Unfortunately, it's always outside of business hours, and if it is at night, [...] it is out of our normal work schedule. We have to organize teams to provide the service, then, with respect to the lifts, we are not supposed to run them at night so we must ask for authorizations and dispensations; it's always complex to set up (ski run and lift operator one).

Security and Legality. To ensure on-site security (and to cover company liability in case of accident) during its services, Delta uses qualified ski instructors. These are sports graduates with emblematic status in the resorts. The company asks them to supervise its customers on the pedestrian paths (not on skis), to oversee snake-gliss downhill runs or other activities such as airboarding. These activities take place on the ski area but outside the normal hours of operation. However these highly skilled State certified ski instructors, who are liable in case of accident, are actors whose time is normally spent supervising skiers on the slopes during the day. In addition, as part of their usual professional obligations, the ski instructors carry out “torchlight downhill skiing runs” to delight customers of the resort. However, for Delta, they use these torches on foot, (along with Delta full-time employees) at the company's request and for a task far less prestigious: to illuminate the path at night. Similarly, ski patrollers who are normally responsible for securing the ski area and intervening in case of accidents during the day are subcontracted by Delta from the track operator to ensure security during snake-gliss downhill runs by night. Delta therefore manages to change the normal activities of ski instructors and ski patrollers to adapt to the needs of specific services rendered to the company. Moreover, to ensure that services are produced and delivered lawfully, Delta seeks and obtains permits. The ski track operator signs an agreement with the company for selecting the tepee site and organising activities on the skiing domain. The mayor, in particular, writes a specific municipal by law or ordinance so that a private actor, in this case Delta, can

use the ski area for purposes other than skiing: “In the context of the skiing domain ordinance, we opened the possibility to run managed activities by day or by night on the ski area” (city hall one).

Therefore, if any travel agency could use existing resources in a winter sports resort, Delta, specifically, uses and operates these resources in an alternative way. While the company could develop a “classic” tourism activity (i.e., a skiing tourist package), its manager refuses to do so. The company decided to position itself outside of the existing associations and practices taking place in the resort. Delta has created a new state of equilibrium in the winter sports resort and thus has managed to move the existing hybrid network. It has changed the main function of the tourist product; in order to do this, it operates many movements and displacements, reinterprets the physical entities and the technical objects. It changes the usual links within the resort by transforming the role of actors and non-humans. The deployment of associations operated by Delta therefore shows unseen assemblages of human and non-human actors. It is this concatenation of heterogeneous actors according to new combinations, to create atypical products, that represents a real innovation (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005; Law, 1992) in the tourism sector, especially in French winter sports resorts where the configuration of services is very static (mainly focused on the ski activity). However, this innovation process raises questions. What is the origin of these new assemblies? How does Delta manage to create links and make actors cooperate while other companies cannot (creating competitive differentiation)? How does it transform the resort network and move it to another state?

The Role of the Entrepreneur in the Innovation Process

A Particular Vision of the Tourist Product. The innovation appears first as the result of a particular positioning of Delta’s leader. He continuously looks for originality for his products, and has specific requirements regarding security. For him, company services must be able to surprise customers; this is “the strength of the unexpected” (it is the company slogan). This is why he wishes to achieve unique service bundling. The “tepee product” is one such example. Delta installs tepees in “virgin” spaces in the middle of winter, away from the usual hospitality locations, away from roads, and brings customers there for lunches or dinners. The originality results from an adventure-like shaping of the product (Pociello, 1999) that Delta is the only one to offer. The company manages to realise it even though it requires a very good knowledge of the mountain environment and raises many practical problems. Indeed, in terms of implementation, the installation of the tepees represents logistic difficulties: heavy, bulky equipment, which is difficult to transport by road; grooming the site; long handling work related to building and dismantling the tepees; delivery of all the equipment on the ski area. Then, in terms of physical accessibility, the location of the tepees is a constraint. Customers can only reach the site by foot. Finally, the product also raises security and legal problems. On

the one hand, to reach the tepees, customers are led to cross the ski area and to follow ski slopes (reserved for skiers during the day and worked with tracks engines at night) by foot. On the other hand, the tepees are subject to a French security regulation against fire (relative to establishments open to the public) and to other regulations related to “circus tents, tents and mobile structures.”

The originality of Delta lies in bringing an “adventure” to the public in a wild (natural and non-built) but controlled environment, sometimes managing large customer flows while overcoming the numerous problems associated with being in a mountain environment and operating a ski area for other purposes than skiing. However, for the leader, the conception of a product also includes a safety requirement and liability coverage in case of accident. The leader plays on this aspect, seen by external actors as a proof of the company’s “reliability” and “professionalism” of the company. It is from this perspective that he tries to structure and formalize his relationships with the stakeholders. But the analysis shows that his actions go far beyond what is normally required, especially when he has city hall make a local municipal ordinance exclusively designed to carry out his activities in the area, when he signs an agreement with the ski track operator for the establishment of tepees inside the ski domain and the delivery of his products after the ski area closes, or when he hires State-certified skiing instructors to oversee non-institutionalized sports activities (sled downhill runs, sliding activities, crossing ski slopes by foot, etc., are unregulated in France). The company does not use the skiing area in a common or traditional way and this unusual usage generates security and liability problems that must be solved creatively.

A Leader Translator. Innovation is therefore related to new company networks that are linked to the leader’s vision of his tourism product. It is indeed the unique and novel vision that he has for his products (originality and safety), that requires the company to develop odd combinations of humans and non-humans (Latour, 2005). However the innovation does not only happen because the company leader has an innovative positioning. It comes from translation flows of the Delta project with all stakeholders. The deployment of the associations above does highlight a set of translations that allows the production of untypical products. These transformations involving new ways of ordering succeed thanks to the (new) collective work of heterogeneous actors in which Delta’s leader appears to be one of the legitimate translators. The purpose of the following section is to present the profile of a translator, with his various rationalities (Weber, 1978), which endow him with the “art of interesting” (Akrich et al., 2002) the actors in a project and developing the necessary connections to carry out transformations.

Delta’s leader followed a sports management education; he had professional experience in sports and tourism before the establishment of his company, and he is an athlete. He earned several sports-related diplomas but, paradoxically for a winter sports business person, these are in no way related to skiing (e.g., scuba diving, ballooning, swim-

ming, etc.). In addition, his company is closely related to himself and his personal interests; he is passionate about what he does and his company objectives closely match his own. For example, he wants his company to enable him to satisfy his passion for sports and travelling, and allow him to fulfil his desires for creativity: “My goals were sport, travel, and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship, I’ve done that. Sports, I’m doing it and will go on [...]. What I want now is travelling. Until now, I’ve postponed my desire to travel for Delta, so I now want Delta to make me travel” (interview with Delta’s leader in 2006). These objectives may not always match Delta’s economic rationality. Finally, this entrepreneur is not a native of the Alps and yet he appears to be a well-integrated actor who is recognized by the mountain environment stakeholders: “working with him, it’s a true pleasure” (restaurateur one), “we have the same way of doing things” (host two), “we have common benchmarks” (ski track and lift operator two), “we are in the same circle, the mountain circle” (restaurateur two), “he proved its worth” (customer-partner one). Moreover, his communication skills and his values make him a man to be trusted by most of the actors who consequently want to work with him:

Our relationship feels good, I have great pleasure conversing with him; he is a very nice person (host three). We have excellent relations (city hall two), based on trust (activity provider one), on good faith (sport provider one), friendly (host two, carrier one, restaurateur three, insurance agent one). There are personal relationships which come into account (tourism office one).

The analysis shows that these specific characteristics allow the support of all involved actors for the Delta project. Human and non-human entities are interested and enrolled through many devices in which the company leader is a legitimate translator of the interests of his business. He has the necessary legitimacy with all stakeholders to mobilise the collective and operate displacements. Indeed, he manages to involve the actors by making them participate in the “socio-technical” innovation that his products represent (tepees, “Olympics,” evening with an altitude, etc.). The actors cooperate and are glad to work with Delta, even if this work represents limited additional revenues and increased complications for some of them (e.g., ski track and lift operator, city hall, ski instructor). Delta’s leader manages, thanks to his intrinsic qualities, his emotional rationality, his interpersonal capabilities, his values, his familiarity with the mountain milieu, and his reputation, to attract and enlist actors in his project. He manages to redefine and operate many transformations (for example, the ski area is reconfigured as both a playground and a food service place), so as to reassemble humans and non-humans, and thereby to get alliances and the mobilisation of the collective. It is precisely because the Delta project is carried out by a network of actors and non-human entities that the innovation succeeds. Delta’s leader has been able to make his company useful in the eyes of actors who, consequently, take the company project into consideration and support

it. But one should not think that translation is the result of a single translator. Others actors also participate and contribute to redefine the project through a chain of translations.

CONCLUSION

Various authors have studied tourism development, innovation, and entrepreneurship in Alpine regions (e.g., Flagestad & Hope, 2001; Pechlaner & Fuchs, 2002; Pechlaner & Tschurtschenthaler, 2003; Pikkemaat & Weiermair, 2003). However, to our knowledge, none have previously considered business innovation with a qualitative approach centred on a specific business. The objective of this research was to better understand how an incoming tourism business, in a winter sports resort, succeeds in an environment that focuses on the skiing product. To answer the research question, the authors relied on qualitative methods and conducted a single case-study of a small destination management company named Delta. Actor-network theory applied to the tourism sector constituted the conceptual framework of the research. In this theoretical perspective, a winter sports resort can be considered as a hybrid network (Latour, 2005; Van Der Duim, 2007), specifically designed for the skiing product, in which each of the involved actors (local elected officials, tourist operators, tourists, etc.) finds an interest. Nevertheless, in this stagnant environment—an irreversible network (Callon, 1986)—Delta has managed to market something other than skiing, and as a result experiences strong growth. The analysis shows that this corporate success stems from the fact that Delta is implementing a socio-technical innovation: The company has produced new associations of humans and non-humans, thereby moving the existing network by transforming it.

A number of conditions are met so that an innovation can exist: External resources must be available and mobilized (resort actors, the ski area, the ski lifts, etc.) and an innovative leader should be capable of identifying market expectations and developing an appropriate service (original and secure). However, these conditions, although necessary, are not sufficient to ensure the success of the innovation. Actor-network theory highlights that innovation is not a linear process with “key success factors” but rather a whirling process. The innovation can only succeed if it is carried by a “collective” (Latour, 2005). But, to get the necessary support from the various stakeholders, the project has to be the subject of a translation with each of them. The case study of Delta shows how an innovation can emerge in a complex and unfavourable environment thanks to a translator who manages to recombine and to reinterpret actors and non-humans by an “*interressement*” (this French word is used by Akrich et al., 2002) and enrolment device. Latour (1996) showed that Aramis, a robotic transit system for Paris, which represented a technological innovation, died “for lack of love.” In the case of Delta, the opposite occurs. The exchanges are not necessarily completely win-win for all involved actors, and in addition, they

require specific technical assemblies from those actors. Nevertheless, the actors adhere to Delta's project and give it their support thanks to the many translations implemented by the entrepreneur, and this enables innovation to take place.

This case study helps better understand the characteristics of a translator, which no empirical study has previously achieved in the tourism sector. In addition, few articles have focused on understanding innovation processes in tourism and even fewer have used actor-network theory to do so. Yet, this approach is particularly relevant, as we have seen, to the study of innovations and the tourism phenomenon because it conceives the society as an on-going process and not as an "already made society." It therefore allows focus on the new associations and networks being formed.

Apart from its contribution to knowledge and theory, this research could also serve as a source of inspiration for practitioners: It shows that, contrary to most current claims, it is the concatenation that can be novel, and not necessarily the actors or the non-human entities themselves. The innovation here relates to a different way of creating associations. This study helps understand how, within a tourist destination, it is possible to produce an innovation with existing resources, and how existing resources can be reconfigured to create a unique and innovative product that will ensure a company's success. ■

Acknowledgements—The authors gratefully acknowledge colleagues at SKEMA Business School and at the University of New Brunswick (Saint John, Canada) for their assistance in editing and polishing the final version of the paper.

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Submitted 29 August 2008. Resubmitted 17 July 2009. Resubmitted 19 November 2009. Final version 14 February 2010. Accepted 19 February 2010. Refereed anonymously. Coordinating Editor: John Tribe

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